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Digitizing DC's Transportation History: Using Omeka and Social Media to Uncover Hidden Collections

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http://ntl.bts.gov/networking/roundtable.html

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DIGITIZING DC'S TRANSPORTATION HISTORY: USING OMEKA AND SOCIAL MEDIA TO UNCOVER HIDDEN COLLECTIONS

FROM THE GROUND UP

- The library was founded in 2011 after going through various incarnations over the years
- Two of us started from the bottom and grew the library, transforming loosely organized boxes of books into a cataloged collection
- At first, the photos and historical materials couldn't be our priority because we had to make sense of the books
- Aside from some of the historical books we cataloged, we didn't really know just what a treasure trove of photographs, newspaper clippings, and other historical items we had in the library
- It also wasn't a big priority—until we saw just how many valuable items we had
- No one outside the agency really knew we were here—but this digitization project has brought attention to the collection

FROM THE GROUND UP

- Finishing the cataloging project for the library (this took a couple of years! Being a lone librarian makes things take a while) left room to turn my attention to the photos and historical documents
- It was like an excavation project
  - Some photos were badly damaged, put in binders and shelved while still covered in dormant mold– we gave these to DCPL
  - The photos were only loosely organized and saved by the historian who worked in the library previously before it was an official project
  - We did a very broad inventory (it would have taken too long to inventory each individual photo) and then started scanning, improving on our schema and tactics over time
  - Scanning is like looking at chapters of a book that are out of order, so it's my job to put the pieces together and tell the visual story of DCs transportation history
  - I never entirely know what I'm going to find when I start digging through a box and scanning– we find cool stuff every day! (Including that shrimp boat photo featured on the intro slide)

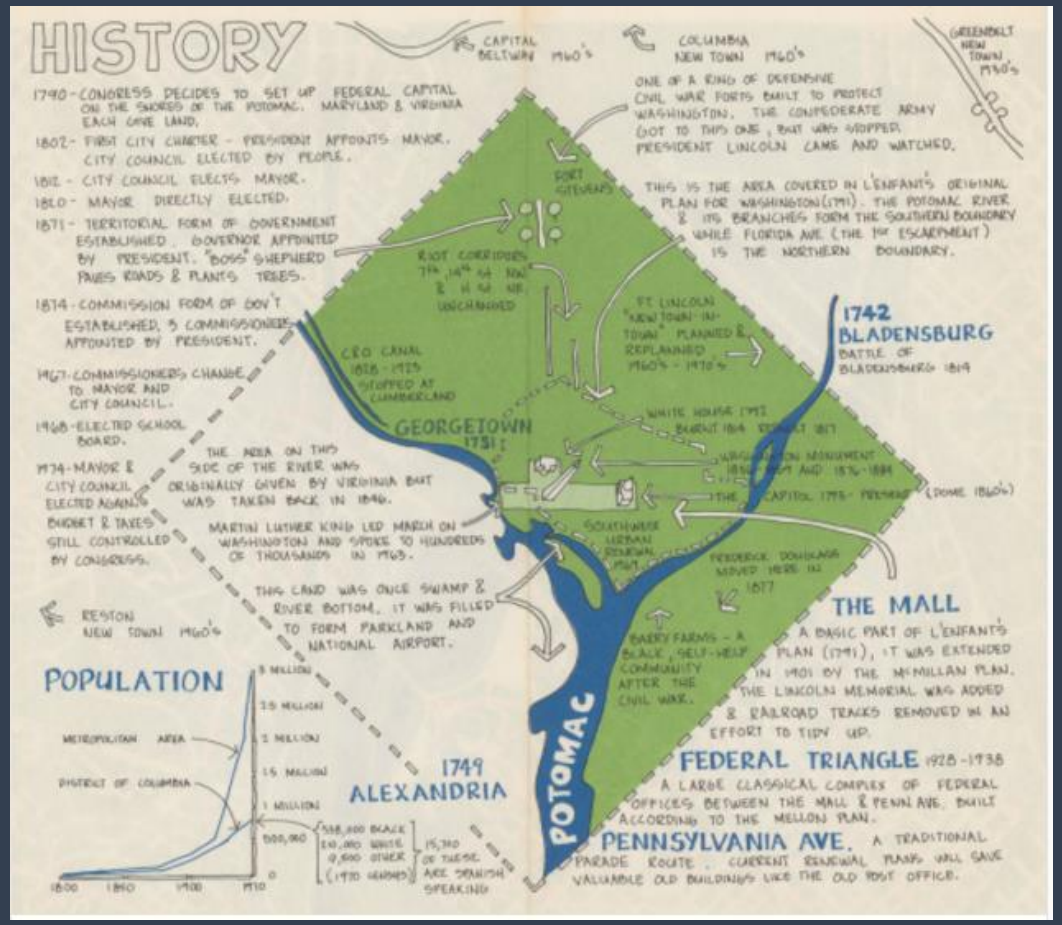
What's in our collection?

- We are a melding of a library and an archive with a dash of a museum
- We've got our general collection of books related to transportation, as well as a historical book collection dating back to the late 1800s—these are available for employees to check out and members of the public to view
- Then we have our archival collection of various historical papers and documents, including maps we'd like to digitize
- Our photo collection is currently our main draw—there's roughly 9,000 or so with the potential to add more current photos later—which is what we've been digitizing so far

SOCIAL MEDIA

- We knew it would be a couple of years before we had enough photos in our online archive to make it public but we didn't want to wait
- We wanted people to be able to see pieces of our collection right now! So our social media was born out of the wider digitization project
- We created the DDOT Tumblr as a beginning and we also now post on Instagram
- A new post goes up once a week on Thursday or Friday
- We have 400+ followers on our Tumblr page
- Tumblr has played a critical role in expanding the visibility of the Library within DDOT, and in bringing these collections to researchers outside the agency, including:
- Posts include:
  - Historic maps photos, documents, various historical memorabilia (old DC Transit streetcar and bus passes, etc)
- Our communications office cross-posts everything to the DDOT Twitter and Facebook pages, extending access to different types of social media users and helping us crowdsource metadata (I'll go into this more later!) Having a following on social media helped us launch the archive when the time came

SOCIAL MEDIA



A series of picture maps of the Washington Metropolitan Region, created for the official bicentennial celebration of the American Revolution (1776-1976). Dated 1975.

*Please view a **full, high-resolution version of the map**.*

Image 2: This section of the document gives an overview of the District, as well as listing information about different Metrobus stops and the in-progress Metrorail (which opened in March 1976, just before the bicentennial).

Image 3: The section gives an up-close look at different sections of the city and inner-ring suburbs, including: Georgetown, Dupont Circle, Southwest, Capitol Hill, and Old Town Alexandria. These special sections point out landmarks such as Howard University, the Library of Congress, the Folger Shakespeare Library, and Rock Creek Park. It also provides information on famous buildings such as the Willard Hotel, the Old Post Office, and the British Embassy.

Image 4: The inset provides historical details about the District and the surrounding region: including a graph that charts the city's population growth and facts about the National Mall and the March on Washington in 1963.

#Maps #DC History #DDOT #Transit #District Department of Transportation

229 notes Sep 18th, 2014

COLLECTION USERS

Who's used our collections? All sorts of people!

- The Good Roads Movement used our photos for two of their historic street walks
- Author John Defarrari used our photos write a book on historic streetcars, then did a talk at the agency
- An attorney/researcher from Harvard who needed information on historical urban renewal
- A researcher writing a book on Baby Boomers growing up in DC
- They've been used within the agency, particularly as historical references for current projects
- The Union Station Redevelopment Corporation
- I'm always glad to have outside researchers come in and use our photos, and I'm hoping the launch of the online archive will draw more people to our collections!

DDOT BACK IN TIME

- Three years ago library staff implemented a digitization project to preserve photographs and other historical documents/plans and put them in an online collection
- We wanted to make historical items accessible to DDOT employees/DC government as well as the public: this is an ongoing, in-progress project
- Also wanted to preserve the photos digitally in case the physical copies degraded
- Omeka proved an excellent content management platform for this! It's pretty intuitive to use
- We also saw other libraries using this as a simpler way to get their photos online
- One of the most intriguing (and frustrating) things about our photo and archival collection is that we have little idea of the provenance of any of the items (who gave them to us) other than most of the photos getting passed down from previous incarnations of DDOT (like the Department of Highways and Traffic) and we know even less about our historical documents and books. They were just here when we started, brought over in the move from our old headquarters

DDOT BACK IN TIME

- We have thousands of photos in the library, as well as historical documents and smatterings of newspaper clippings
- Over the course of two years, we started digitizing photos first, with just me and the help of various very dedicated interns (it took us a year to get the software and the scanner we'd need to begin the project in earnest) and now we've got a few thousand photos up. It is just us doing the work---we don't have outside help
- We still have a lot of work to do! There are thousands of items to digitize– we'll be working on this project for several years to come
- But we publically launched the site this summer
- Some of our photos lack full data, and we're hoping all the DC history buffs can help us (we're looking into some mechanisms for this!) Omeka has a commenting feature we might take advantage of
- Sometimes our photos have very detailed data (usually construction photos) but some have nothing more than an engineer's handwriting– so sometimes our data is incomplete (and sometimes incorrect)

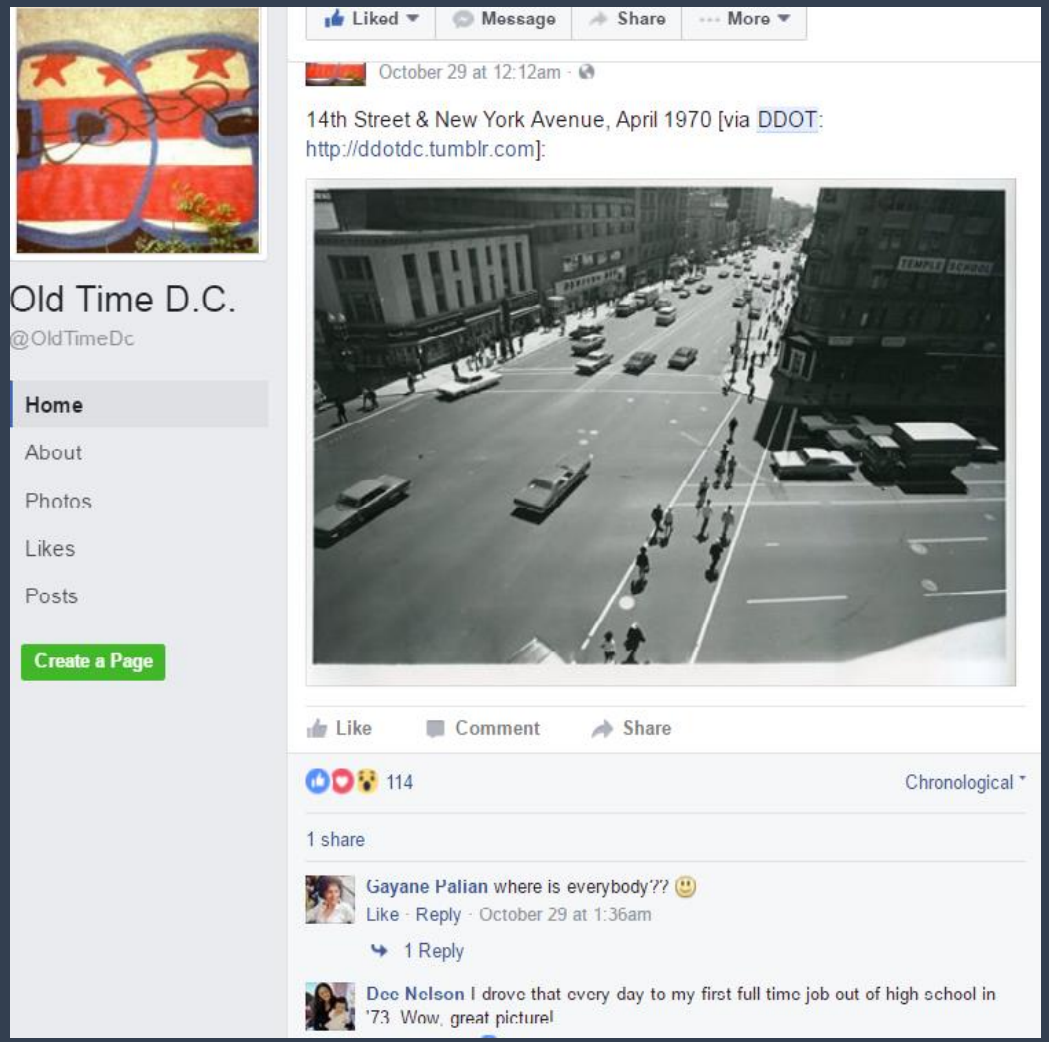
DDOT BACK IN TIME- CHALLENGES

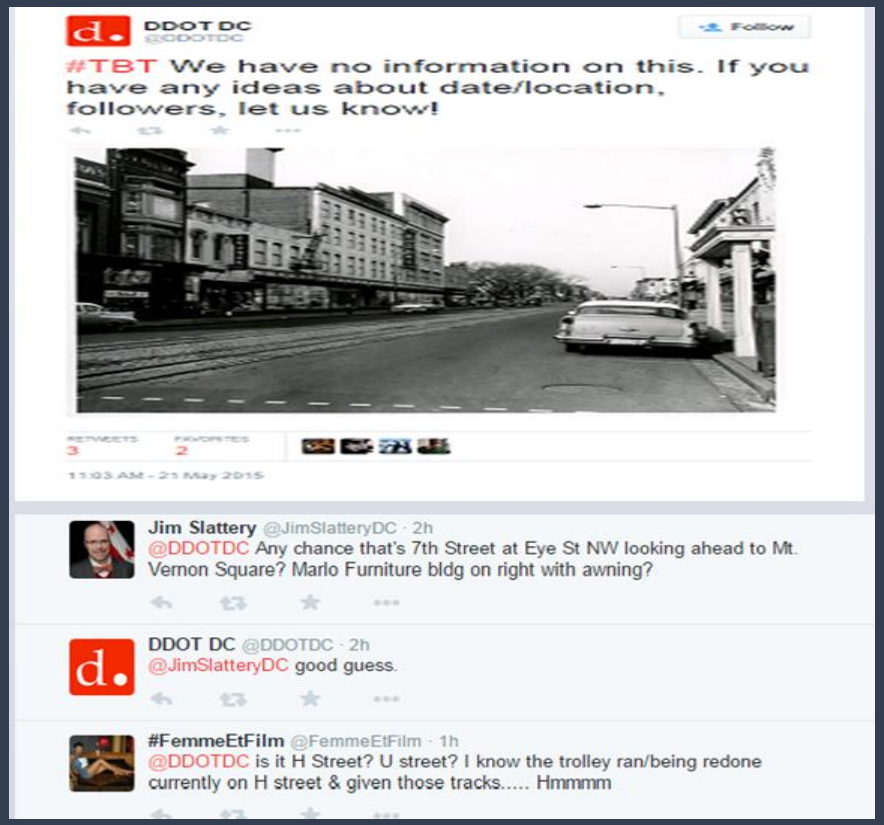
- Who do these photos belong to? As far as we can tell, most items in here were created by older incarnations of the agency but we did run into some questions as we sorted out permissions for the website
- The permissions took a few months to sort out
  - Photos taken before 1973 generally are public domain because DC government was federally controlled
  - After that they are DC intellectual property, which there is some debate over, but we got permission from our legal team to put them up
  - The year between 1972-1973 is murky because that's the year DC transitioned to Home Rule
- Subjects! Every photo we scan has multiple subjects in it. So it's up to us not only to decide what the main subject is so we can decide on where it goes within the site's organization schema, but also what subjects to add on the page for each individual photo. If you put too many, you risk ruining the search, but things get lost if there's not enough. I've learned more about DC transportation controversy (mostly over construction projects for things like highways) while trying to flesh out descriptions for groupings of photos

DDOT BACK IN TIME- CHALLENGES

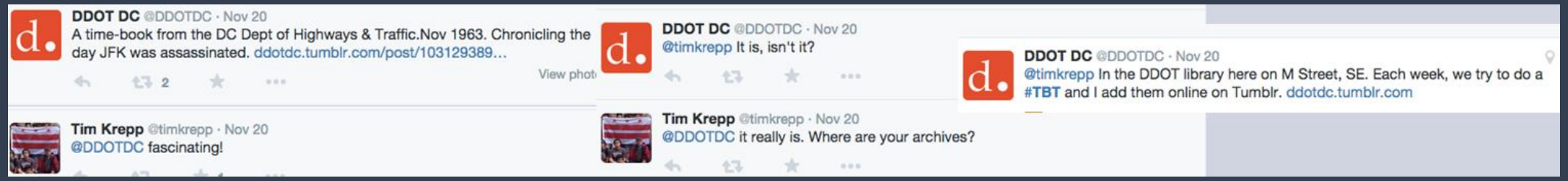
- It was difficult to get this project off the ground at first
- It was a year between when I first requested funding for the Omeka software and when I actually got it (we were doing social media work in the meantime to put out word about the collection)
- We had to prove the value of the project:
- Why was it important to digitize the photos?
- Who would be interested in them?
- Was the project worth the investment and the employee hours?
- I used the interest we'd generated on social media and the state of some of the photos/historical materials as arguments for both access and preservation
- I found very strong allies in the IT department, who work a great deal on open data and knowledge management projects
- And once people realized what great stuff we had in the library, more and more interest was generated
- I needed people to see the value of the past since DDOT is such a forward looking agency

CROWDSOURCING





Sometimes we don't have metadata on our photos (which were previously handled by a historian) and we take to Twitter to see if people might have location/date info. Turns out sometimes they do!



We found an old time-book noting the day the of the JFK assassination and the day of the funeral! Twitter was into it.

A photograph of the National Trade and Professional School for Women and Girls at 601 50th Street, NE. Founded by Nannie Helen Burroughs in 1909, it served as one of the first training schools for African American girls and women. It was named after her in the 1960s. Dated July 25, 1963.

The Dupont Circle Underpass, dated October 17, 1949. The Dupont Circle Underpass was constructed in the 1940s, partially for streetcar use, though the underground trolley stations were only in operation for 13 years, closing in 1962. Free-wheel vehicles went straight through and streetcars followed the outer periphery of the circle.

The Loew's Palace Theater, dated March 31, 1966. The theater opened in 1918, showing motion pictures as well as stage shows from 1926-1932. It closed in 1978 and was torn down in 1979 after being renovated in the 60s.

A group of WAVES, (**Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service**) a division of the U.S. Navy created in July 1942, cross Nebraska Avenue NW from their barracks after the installation of a new pedestrian signal. Dated March 1945.

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http://ddotlibrary.omeka.net/

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